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'What's So Bad?' Ex-Racketeer Asks

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WASHINGTON — Carlos Marcello, called "the Mafia boss of the South," leaned back in the large black leather chair in his handsome office in New Orleans and told the first newsman who ever interviewed him:

"Sure, I've got plenty of political connections. I don't deny that. I've been helping put people in office for years. I've spent a whole lot of money on campaign contributions, and I've spread the word to people to support my candidates. What's wrong with that?"

"I THOUGHT it was everybody's duty to take part in politics. I hear talk all the time that it's terrible that Carlos Marcello is supporting so-and-so for office. You don't hear that it's terrible that the banks or the utilities or the oil companies are supporting so-and-so."

But what sort of "strings" are attached to his support of various candidates? asked his interviewer, prize-winning crime reporter and author Michael Dorman.

"The Little Man," a nickname stemming from Marcello's 5-foot-3 height, replied: "Well naturally, I'm not going to support someone who's later going to go out of his way to try to hurt me. In the old days, when I was involved in gambling, I'd try to elect a governor or mayor or district attorney who took a lenient position on the gambling issue."

NATURALLY, I expect my friends in government to do what they can to cut red tape and help me when they can. I'm not talkin' about anything crooked or underhanded . . ."

Dorman relates this and much more about "one of the most important racketeers in the country" for the first time in a new book, "Payoff." Dorman set up the interview through a trusted intermediary whom the writer describes simply as "a racketeer."

Marcello's acceptance of the author's credentials came on the day of June 19, 1972, when he greeted Dorman by saying, "I've heard a lot about you — that you're a straight-shooter — so I decided to tell you."

Marcello explained, "A lot of people have been trying to crucify me. They're spreadin' a lot of crap about me . . . I figured it was time to tell my side of the story."

"THE LITTLE MAN" denied any Mafia or Cosa Nostra connections, but said, "Sure, I used to be involved in the rackets." But he gave that up 10 years ago, Marcello asserted and went legitimate.

He added: "I'm makin' millions of dollars in real estate, motels, restaurants and the rest. What the hell do I need gambling or narcotics or anything like that for? I'd be a fool to take the risk."

The intermediary interjected to say that federal crime fighters got interested in Marcello at the behest of the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. That, "the racketeer" intermediary claimed, was because Marcello refused to help swing Louisiana's Democratic convention delegation to Kennedy's brother, John F., when the latter ran successfully for president. Marcello said he backed the then-Democratic Senate leader, Lyndon B. Johnson. And, "once things get started in Washington, it's hard to stop them."

MARCELLO refused, Dorman writes, to identify any friends in government at any level. But he conceded they included top state and local officials, and leading figures in both houses of Congress.

"If I've done anything wrong," Marcello said, "Let's see somebody prosecute me for it. Why should I have to apologize for who my friends are — for having friends who are politicians?"

The intermediary spoke up again to say that once he and a "friend" supported both candidates for governor of Louisiana in a runoff election.

The intermediary explained, "I put up just about all the campaign money for one of the candidates; my partner put up the money for the other guy."

"WE MADE just one demand on these candidates. What we wanted was the power to name the next state conservation commissioner. You'd think a conservation commissioner would be an unimportant guy. But this election was in an oil state . . . and the conservation commissioner had the power to approve or reject the drilling of every oil and natural gas well."

"After the election, we named the commission — and there were millions made through that appointment. With a deal like that, who the hell needs gambling?"

HOW DO top racketeers survive and prosper? Dorman's answer: "Because influential politicians and law-enforcement officials find secret alliances with mobsters both expedient and profitable."

Marcello, on a police blotter at 19, has a record involving bank robbery, assault, holdup and federal tax evasion. His total jail time: Less than six years.

He's 62 now, and as he says, "makin' millions."